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Viewing cable 06MANAGUA417, NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: RIVAS

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06MANAGUA417	2006-02-22 23:00	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

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SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS REGIONAL REPORTING: RIVAS

Classified By: Ambassador Paul Trivelli for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary: With the November national elections still distant in the minds of the citizens of the southern Nicaraguan department of Rivas, none of the major candidates seems to have made a significant impact on the views of the voting public. That stated, most contacts indicate that Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN-PC) candidate Eduardo Montealegre appears to have made the most headway, followed distantly by Sandinista dissident Herty Lewites and Montealegre's fellow Liberal dissident Jose Antonio Alvarado.

While most acknowledged that the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC) -- once a powerhouse in the region -- has been weakened by association with the corrupt leadership of Arnaldo Aleman, the eventual PLC candidate could gain considerable support if he is seen as independent from Aleman. Most Rivas Liberals, regardless of party affiliation, favor a Montealegre/Alvarado ticket heading a PLC-led alliance.

¶2. (C) Summary continued: Although the majority of the population leans Liberal, the FSLN has the strongest party structure and political control of most municipalities in the department. Moreover, contacts indicated that the citizens of Rivas are more likely to vote for a person than a party, which could lead to split tickets in the election if the Liberals do not unify. End Summary.

¶3. (C) Poloff and Political Assistant met with local political, economic, social and religious leaders in Rivas on February 15 and 16 to discuss the upcoming national elections and other issues. We received the overall impression that the population has not yet focused on the elections and that none of the candidates or parties has made a strong impact. Rivas has ten municipalities, seven are controlled by the FSLN/Convergencia, two are PLC (Rivas and Moyogalpa) and one is Conservative (San Jorge). Several contacts explained that Rivas was not a center of conflict during the 1980s civil war, so the population is generally not as overtly partisan and tends to vote for popular individuals, regardless of party affiliation.

EDUARDO DRAWS "SYMPATHY" IN RIVAS

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¶4. (C) Although most of the population has not begun to pay attention to the national elections, many of our contacts believe that Eduardo Montealegre currently enjoys the most support of any presidential candidate. Father Giovanni Loaisiga of the Catholic Church, Departmental Electoral Council (CED) President Jose Angel Granados, and Rivas

Ranchers' Association member Noel Rivas all agreed that Montealegre currently leads the field of candidates, although they believe his position could change as the elections draw nearer.

15. (C) Even Montealegre's Liberal rivals in Rivas claimed they would back his candidacy under the right circumstances. The departmental president for APRE, Augustin Lacayo, told us that Montealegre is a "good person" that he would support if APRE eventually joins Montealegre's alliance. "Amigos de Alvarado" head Milton Arcia said Montealegre is "honorable," though claimed that his background as an upper-class banker alienates him from most Nicaraguans. PLC mayor of Moyogalpa Jose Martinez explained that he privately has "sympathy" for Montealegre, though he cannot support him publicly, and believes that Moyogalpa will support Eduardo in the elections.

16. (C) Jorge Prendiz, the deputy departmental coordinator for the "Vamos con Eduardo" movement, told us that "Vamos" has formed a directorship in every municipality, with some organization at the town/neighborhood level. "Vamos" has registered 8,500 affiliates and has a goal of registering 11,400 in a total voting population of 110,000. Prendiz admitted that the structural organization of Montealegre's alliance is not as strong as it should be, and efforts are hampered by a lack of funds, though he acknowledged that most of "Vamos'" funds are currently dedicated to the Atlantic Coast campaign.

17. (C) Prendiz expressed a surprising level of dissatisfaction with decisions taken at the national level of the alliance. He said that the affiliates want primaries to select the alliance's deputy candidates and would be disenchanted with any other outcome. Prendiz complained that the Conservative Party has too high a profile in the alliance, which he claimed is damaging Eduardo's image with the electorate. He is resentful that the vice presidential position was promised to a Conservative, and claimed that rival Liberal candidate Jose Antonio Alvarado would be "much better." (Comment: Other observers noted that the Conservatives actually have a relatively strong base in Rivas and control the municipality of San Jorge. Prendiz likely realizes that his own chances of obtaining a position in government would be considerably increased without having to share the spoils with the Conservatives. On a different subject, Prendiz was recommended to us by "Vamos" national headquarters instead of the head director. In a later meeting, local Etica y Transparencia director Octavio Ortega called the "Vamos" director a "drunk" who was appointed for political reasons, but who is managing Montealegre's campaign incompetently. End Comment.)

DIVISIONS APPARENT AMONG ALVARADO'S ALLIES IN DEPARTMENT

18. (C) The president of "Amigos de Alvarado" in Rivas is Milton Arcia, a wealthy businessman who owns the only ferry that provides regular service to the island of Ometepe. Arcia told us that he supports Alvarado with his time and financial resources because Alvarado is a personal friend and "well qualified" as a presidential candidate, having headed five ministries under various Liberal administrations. When asked if Arcia would support a Montealegre/Alvarado ticket, he replied that Montealegre does not possess the leadership qualities necessary to defeat FSLN candidate Daniel Ortega. Regarding Montealegre's consistently wide lead in the polls, he repeated the allegation that the polls are "bought" and manipulated by a media sympathetic to Montealegre. Arcia was also convinced that Alvarado would win internal PLC primaries if allowed to participate. Queried on his ties to APRE, the largest party where Alvarado is currently running as a pre-candidate, Arcia derided the party as "gallo pinto" (a dish of mixed rice and beans, referring to its inclusion of members from different ideological backgrounds) and proclaimed himself a "Liberal, through and through."

19. (C) APRE departmental president Augustin Lacayo confirmed that APRE's relationship with the "Amigos" in Rivas is

"interesting" and "needs clarification." He noted that APRE had received Alvarado in Rivas on February 11 and accompanied him on a trip to Ometepe. (Note: Arcia did not seem to be aware of the details of the visit. End note.)

¶10. (C) Aside from Arcia and Lacayo, no one else seemed to have any confidence in Alvarado's campaign. Octavio Ortega accused Alvarado of using GON employees to support his campaign (an allegation we have heard frequently), which Ortega said "looks bad". Ortega told us that APRE had been considerably weakened in Rivas when the Conservatives left the alliance after the 2004 municipal elections.

HERTY'S CAMPAIGN OPERATING ON A SHOESTRING

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¶11. (C) Miguel Angel Escorcía, president of "Herty 2006" in Rivas, admitted that Montealegre probably enjoys the most support of any candidate in the department, but claimed that dissident Sandinista candidate Herty Lewites is gaining steam. Escorcía explained that the local directorship of "Herty 2006" is composed of ex-FSLN members, but affiliates also include significant numbers of Liberals and Conservatives. He claimed that 25 percent of Sandinista voters will support Herty, and that three of the seven Sandinista mayors in Rivas privately back Lewites. Escorcía told us that "Herty 2006" has a leadership structure in every municipality, but the organization only receives US\$280 per month for operating expenses (he showed us a receipt). He said that the movement would select deputy candidates some time in April. Escorcía emphasized that Herty's deputies "know that they will only make US\$2,000 a month instead of US\$4,500" once Lewites reforms the salary scale.

¶12. (C) Other contacts were skeptical of Herty's chances in Rivas. Augustin Lacayo claimed that Lewites "has nothing" in Rivas and will eventually rejoin Ortega in the FSLN. Jorge Prendiz said that Lewites will not capture more than 10 percent of the Sandinista vote. Interestingly, Amcham member Hector Sanchez Arguello, a former Contra commander, told us that he and other businessmen are supporting Herty as a ploy to weaken Ortega. He also mentioned that Lewites' nephew is an investor in Remanso Beach, the development project that Arguello manages.

PLC SUFFERING FROM ALLEGIANCE TO ALEMAN

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¶13. (C) Most contacts noted that the PLC, as in other areas of the country, has suffered a decline and will not successfully compete with the Liberal dissidents in the national elections. The PLC vice mayor of the city of Rivas, Marcia Tijerino, stated bluntly that "the Liberals will lose the elections without unity." Rivas mayor Jose Martinez (Arnoldo Aleman's MC during his 1996 presidential campaign) welcomes all Liberal candidates to visit Rivas, and has in fact had meetings with Alvarado and Montealegre. However, Tijerino and Martinez both insisted that the PLC is the Liberal flagship party with Aleman as its leader, and that other Liberals should play by the PLC's rules. (Note: In a private aside after the main meeting, Martinez acknowledged that the PLC has "major problems" and implied that Aleman is the source. End Note.)

¶14. (C) In private meetings, other local PLC leaders were even more critical of the national leadership. CED president Jose Angel Granados told us that the national PLC directorship does not want to choose deputies using primaries (a mistake), so Montealegre and Alvarado should convince them through negotiations. Moyogalpa mayor Jose Martinez agreed that Arnoldo Aleman's corrupt leadership of the party has caused the PLC's current weakness and is the main obstacle to Liberal unity. Martinez explained that the PLC lost several municipalities to the FSLN in 2004 because the national leadership imposed loyal candidates in several instances instead of letting the strongest contenders compete -- a strategy that backfired.

¶15. (C) None of the PLC pre-candidates, aside from Jose Rizo,

seemed to enjoy any support at all in the department. Contacts noted that Enrique Quinonez and Noel Ramirez have visited Rivas recently, but with little impact. Granados and Noel Rivera claimed that Rizo has some following in the department, however, Rivera indicated that Aleman would not allow Rizo to win the nomination.

FSLN STRONG AND ORGANIZED

¶16. (C) Virtually everyone we spoke with acknowledged that, while the majority of the population has Liberal sympathies, the FSLN is strong and organized. Moyogalpa mayor Jose Martinez stated that the FSLN is the only party in the department that is truly organized and that "you will never find a Sandinista without a cedula (voter ID card)." Monsignor Leonel Navas of the Catholic diocese told us that the FSLN wields considerable influence and the seven Sandinista mayors in Rivas help the party campaign. Rivas Chamber of Commerce treasurer Benancia Ibarra explained that the Sandinistas trained people to expect the government to "give them favors" -- something that the PLC has not mastered.

ELECTORAL AUTHORITY IS A "DISASTER"

¶17. (C) As usual, most contacts were highly critical of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) and local Departmental Electoral Council (CED). Rivas vice mayor Imelda Martinez claimed that the PLC is disadvantaged because CSE president Roberto Rivas has betrayed the party and sided with the FSLN. Miguel Angel Escorcia of "Herty 2006" pleaded for OAS observers to curtail "massive fraud" planned by the CSE. He added his observation that "only Arnoldistas and Danielistas get cedulas." APRE head Augustin Lacayo labeled the CSE a "disaster" and stated that the partisan magistrates conspire to shut out small parties. Moyogalpa mayor Jose Martinez said the CED is "very deficient" and does not deliver cedulas to Ometepe. He noted that the cost to travel to Rivas is at least 100 cordobas, when the average worker on Ometepe only earns 30 cordobas a day. On a more personal level, Rivas Chamber of Commerce member Pedro Mendoza said he had to pay a bribe to "get anything done at the CED."

¶18. (C) Local CED president and former PLC departmental head Jose Angel Granados acknowledged many of the accusations made against the CSE and CED. He admitted that the CED has retained several thousand cedulas for citizens of Ometepe that have not been delivered for "lack of resources," though he said the opening of municipal offices in June or July should alleviate the problem. Granados agreed with Escorcia that without a strong observer presence, "the FSLN will steal the vote." He admitted that the "raton loco" (deliberately switching citizens from one voting location to another to cause confusion) had dissuaded many people from voting in 2004 and claimed that both the FSLN and PLC have "radical members" who will try to manipulate the vote in their party's favor.

RIVAS: DEMOGRAPHICS AND VOTING PROFILE

¶19. (U) Total Population (2005 est.): 166,938
Total Urban Population: 68,123
Total Rural Population: 98,815

Votes Received by Party, 2004 Municipal Elections
PLC: 23,212
FSLN: 26,812
APRE: 8,579
PRN: 1,138
AC: 1,359
Others: 997

COMMENT: ADAPTING TO A CHANGING ELECTORATE

¶20. (C) The lack of personal identification with a political

party is a trend that is perhaps more advanced in Rivas due to the relative lack of violent ideological confrontation in the department, but it is becoming more pervasive throughout Nicaragua as memories of the 1980s civil war rapidly recede in the minds of a young population. The FSLN has capitalized on this phenomenon by, at the national level, seeking a rapprochement with the Catholic Church and toning down its Marxist rhetoric in some venues. On the local level, the FSLN uses primaries with its Convergencia partners to select mayoral and National Assembly deputy candidates. To be sure, these primaries are often fixed or manipulated, but the FSLN in recent years has tapped better candidates in general than the PLC, which often imposes candidates by "dedazo" who have no greater qualification than their abject loyalty to Aleman.

Unless the moribund Liberals adapt and accept a more democratic method of candidate selection, particularly at the local and Assembly level, the FSLN may continue to gain electoral ground.

TRIVELLI